

Caught between norm and deviation?

A psycholinguistic perspective on the case of *wegen* + dative in German

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The case selection of the German preposition *wegen* ('because of', 'due to') is a prominent doubtful case (KLEIN 2003). Both genitive and dative are possible prepositional cases, e.g. *wegen des Wetters* ('due to the weather-GEN.SG') vs. *wegen dem Wetter* ('due to the weather-DAT.SG'). This variation is the result of ongoing language change. The change of case selection from genitive to dative can be interpreted as divergence of *wegen* from the original construction and as convergence towards the case selection of primary prepositions forming the prototype of German prepositions (DI MEOLA 2000, SZCZEPANIAK 2011).

Wegen + dative has been highly stigmatised in prescriptive grammars, resulting into the dative being associated with spoken language and dialects. The genitive, in contrast, is associated with formal speech registers and considered as the more prestigious case (DAVIES/LANGER 2006). Based on COSERIU'S (1971) differentiation between norm and system, *wegen* + dative can be seen as a (former) norm deviation in two aspects: Firstly, it deviates from the norm as its status is caught in between primary and secondary prepositions of German. Secondly, the construction used to be a deviation from the standard norm. Today, authoritative grammars allow *wegen* + dative and *wegen* + genitive, but the dative is still seen as inferior to the genitive in lay linguistic discourse. Here, variation in case selection is pitied as it is equalised with the decline of the genitive (SZCZEPANIAK 2014).

My talk adds a psycholinguistic perspective to the case of *wegen* by investigating the question of how *wegen* + dative is processed. To address this question, a self-paced-reading task was carried out. This task allows to track the participants' reading time (RT). Here, the RT of *wegen* and its possible case selection is of interest. Participants did not only read *wegen* + genitive and *wegen* + dative, but also *wegen* + nominative which is a system deviation as the nominative is not a possible prepositional case in German. Since the nominative is ungrammatical, it should show the slowest RT and thus adds a base line to which the RT of *wegen* + dative is contrasted.

The experiment shows a significantly higher RT for *wegen* + nominative than for the other combinations. Thus, the status of *wegen* + nominative as a mistake is mirrored by difficulties in language processing. If this is not the case for *wegen* + dative, this will lead to a new perspective on doubtful cases: Normally, language processing can serve speakers as a "compass" to determine the correctness of constructions. When it comes to doubtful cases, speakers are confronted with forms that are equal with regard to processing but not to the prescribed norm. The "compass" is not working anymore. Consequently, doubts arise which form should be considered correct.

References:

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